

Gospel of Luke

Title: As with the other 3 gospels, the title is derived from the author's name. According to tradition, Luke was a Gentile. The Apostle Paul seems to confirm this, distinguishing Luke from those who were "from the circumcision" (Col. 4:11, 14). That would make Luke the only Gentile to pen any books of Scripture. He is responsible for a significant portion of the New Testament, having written both this gospel and the book of Acts (see Author and Date).

Very little is known about Luke. He almost never included personal details about himself, and nothing definite is known about his background or his conversion. Both Eusebius and Jerome identified him as a native of Antioch (which may explain why so much of the book of Acts centers on Antioch (compare Acts 11:19-27; 13:1-3; 14:26; 15:22-23, 30-35; 18:22-23). Luke was a frequent companion of the Apostle Paul, at least from the time of Paul's Macedonian vision (Acts 16:9-10), right up to the time of Paul's martyrdom (2 Tim. 4:11).

The Apostle Paul referred to Luke as a physician (Col. 4:14). Luke's interest in medical phenomena is evident in the high profile he gave to Jesus' healing ministry (e.g., 4:38-40; 5:15-25; 6:17-19; 7:11-15; 8:43-47, 49-56; 9:2, 6, 11; 13:11-13; 14:2-4; 17:12-14; 22:50-51). In Luke's day, physicians did not have a unique vocabulary of technical terminology; so when Luke discusses healings and other medical issues, his language is not markedly different from that of the other gospel writers.

Author - Date: Ancient testimony is unanimous that Luke ("the beloved physician," Col. 4:14), penned the third Gospel. Modern scholarship has rightly drawn attention to Luke as the companion volume to Acts; the two works were certainly written by the same author.

The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts clearly were written by the same individual (compare 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). Although he never identified himself by name, it is clear from his use of "we" in many sections of Acts that he was a close companion of the Apostle Paul (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1 - 28:16). Luke is the only person, among the colleagues Paul mentions in his own epistles (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24), who fits the profile of the author of these books. That accords perfectly with the earliest tradition of the church which unanimously attributed this gospel to Luke.

Luke and Acts appear to have been written at about the same time, the gospel of Luke first, then Acts. Combined, they make a 2-volume work addressed to "Theophilus" (1:3; Acts 1:1 see Background and Setting), giving a sweeping history of the founding of Christianity, from the birth of Christ to Paul's imprisonment under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30-31).

The book of Acts ends with Paul still in Rome, which leads to the conclusion that Luke wrote these books from Rome during Paul's imprisonment there (ca. A.D. 60-62. Luke records Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (19:42-44; 21:20-24), but makes no mention of the fulfillment of that prophecy, either here or in Acts. Luke made it a point to record such prophetic fulfillments (compare Acts 11:28), so it is extremely unlikely he wrote these books after the Roman invasion of Jerusalem. Acts also includes no mention of the great persecution

that began under Nero in A.D. 64. In addition, many scholars set the date of James' martyrdom at A.D. 62, and if that was before Luke completed his history, he certainly would have mentioned it. So, the most likely date for this gospel is A.D. 60 or 61.

Background – Setting: Luke dedicated his works to “most excellent Theophilus” (literally “lover of God”, 1:3; compare Acts 1:1). This designation, which may be a nickname or a pseudonym, is accompanied by a formal address (“most excellent”), possibly signifying that “Theophilus” was a well known Roman dignitary, perhaps one of those who had turned to Christ in “Caesar’s household” (Phil. 4:22).

It is almost certain however, that Luke envisioned a much broader audience for his work than this one man. The dedications at the outset of Luke and Acts are like the formal dedication in a modern book. They are not like the address of an epistle.

Luke expressly stated that his knowledge of the events recorded in his gospel came from the reports of those who were eyewitnesses (1:1-2), strongly implying that he himself was not an eyewitness. It is clear from his prologue that his aim was to give an ordered account of the events of Jesus' life, but this does not mean he always followed a strict chronological order in all instances (e.g. see note on 3:20).

By acknowledging that he had compiled his account from various extant sources (see note on 1:1), Luke was not disclaiming divine inspiration for his work. The process of inspiration never bypasses or overrides the personalities, vocabularies, and styles of the human authors of Scripture. The unique traits of the human authors are always indelibly stamped on all the books of scripture. Luke's research is no exception to this rule. The research itself was orchestrated by divine Providence. And in his writing, Luke was moved by the Spirit of God (2 Peter 1:21). Therefore, his account is infallibly true (see note on 1:3).

Some modern interpreters discount Luke's authorship, but they fall short of proposing a convincing alternative to the ancient witnesses. These scholars feel that Luke's outlook is so different from Paul's that no companion of Paul (see Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24), and the “we” sections of (Acts: 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16), could have written Luke and Acts. Such arguments are by no means convincing. The reader of the New Testament is not compelled to choose between Luke and Paul. Differences in outlook may as easily count in favor of Luke's authorship as against.

While Luke was not himself an eyewitness of the gospel events (1:2), he had access to writings about, and eyewitnesses to, them. He had sifted sources carefully. Many feel that he must have made use of Mark's gospel. Some have accordingly stressed his contribution as a historian, a discoverer and preserver of facts. Others see in him primarily a theologian, an expositor of the meaning of facts. He is really both. He presents both the meaning of the gospel saga and its factual ground. He produces what is, by the reckoning of many, the gospel most attractive in style and poignant in message that we possess.

Luke implies that he wrote his gospel prior to writing Acts (Acts 1:1). Acts ends with Paul in prison, about A.D. 62. Many scholars of various persuasions thus agree on a date near A.D. 60-

62 for the writing of Luke. Those who date it much later (A.D. 80-90, or even in the second century) do so for reasons that fail to overturn the likelihood of an earlier date.

Historical – Theological Themes: Luke's style is that of a scholarly, well-read author (see note on 1:1-4). He wrote as a meticulous historian, often giving details that helped identify the historical context of the events he described (1:5; 2:1-2; 3:1-2; 13:1-4).

His account of the nativity is the fullest in all the gospel records, and (like the rest of Luke's work), more polished in its literary style. He included in the birth narrative a series of praise psalms (1:46-55; 1:68-79; 2:14; 2:29-32, 34-35). He alone reported the unusual circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptist, the annunciation to Mary, the manger, the shepherds and Simeon and Anna (2:25-38).

A running theme in Luke's gospel is Jesus' compassion for Gentiles, Samaritans, women, children, tax collectors, sinners and others often regarded as outcasts in Israel. Every time he mentions a tax collector (3:12; 5:27; 7:29; 15:1; 18:10-13; 19:2), it is in a positive sense. Yet, Luke did not ignore the salvation of those who were rich and respectable, e.g. 23:50-53. From the outset of Jesus' public ministry (4:18), to the Lord's final words on the cross (23:40-43), Luke underscored this theme of Christ's ministry to the pariahs of society. Again and again, he showed how the Great Physician ministered to those most aware of their need (compare 5:31-32; 15:4-7, 31-32; 19:10).

The high-profile Luke accords to women is particularly significant. From the nativity account, where Mary, Elizabeth and Anna are given prominence (chapters 1 and 2), to the events of resurrection morning, where women again are major characters (24:1, 10), Luke emphasized the central role of women in the life and ministry of our Lord (e.g. 7:12-15, 37-50; 8:2-3, 43-48; 10:38-42; 13:11-13; 21:2-4; 23:27-29, 49, 55-56).

Several other recurring themes form threads through Luke's gospel. Examples of these are human fear in the presence of God (see note on 1:12); forgiveness (3:3; 5:20-25; 6:37; 7:41-50; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3-4; 23:34; 24:47); joy (see note on 1:14); wonder at the mysteries of divine truth (see note on 2:18); the role of the Holy Spirit (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-27; 3:16, 22, 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12); the temple in Jerusalem (1:9-22; 2:27-38, 46-49; 4:9-13; 18:10-14; 19:45-48; 20:1 – 21:6; 21:37-38; 24:53); and Jesus' prayers (see note on 6:12).

Starting with 9:51, Luke devoted 10 chapters of his narrative to a travelogue of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. Much of the material in this section is unique to Luke. This is the heart of Luke's gospel, and it features a theme Luke stressed throughout: Jesus' relentless progression toward the cross. This was the very purpose for which Christ had come to earth (compare 9:22-23; 17:25; 18:31-33; 24:25-26, 46), and He would not be deterred. The saving of sinners was His whole mission (19:10).

Distinctive Features: Luke's language: He uses 266 words (not counting proper names), found nowhere else in the New Testament. He is capable of elevated literary style (1:1-4). He often writes in a manner reminiscent of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old

Testament. If he was a Gentile, as many think, he nonetheless knew and loved the Old Testament well.

Luke's accuracy: For many, of course, accuracy in a biblical writing is assumed. But Luke has been a prominent battleground (one scholar calls Lucan studies a "storm center"), for those probing the New Testament's reliability, since it so clearly places itself in the context of ancient history (e.g., 3:1-2).

The historian and classical scholar Sir William Ramsay (1852–1916), began by assuming Luke's inaccuracy, but became convinced rather of the opposite. In this, Ramsay is hardly alone. Where Luke can be tested, he shows a remarkable command of often obscure facts, and a determination not to distort those facts in the telling.

Luke's focus: Several themes dominate the gospel. Luke stresses the overarching plan of God in human history as revealed through Israel, Christ, and the church. He puts special emphasis on "salvation" as such (the word, though not the idea, is absent from Matthew and Mark, and appears once in John).

He is concerned with individuals (Zechariah, Elisabeth, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary and Martha, and Zaccheus, to name a few), shows the importance of women, and calls special attention to children, the poor, and the disreputable. He stresses the Holy Spirit, both in the life of Jesus and in the early church. Finally, as in all the gospels, Jesus' suffering and death find lengthy and detailed treatment. Luke's gospel is a careful and engrossing presentation of God's saving will and work in the world, preeminently through His Son.